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A One Act Play.

Imaginary beings: three characters walk into a b

by

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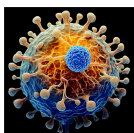
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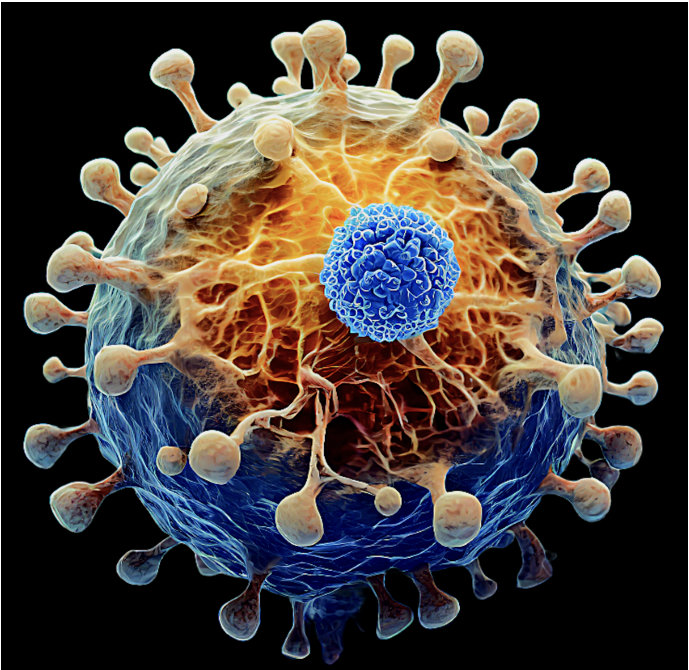
relude.

Three characters walk into a bar, a Virus, a Human and Santa Claus. The bar tender refuses to serve the Human and Santa Claus on the basis that he regards them as chimera¹, but happily serves them three beakers of industrial alcohol, which the Virus generously shares with his two colleagues.

As the bar is otherwise empty, the bar tender joins them at the lively discussion ensues in the form of a classical exposition of an argumentative discourse designed to test the identity, integrity and sovereignty of each drinker.

This hypothetical scenario seeks to analyse the biological identity of historical constructions that define life, and to trace the genetic leakages and seepages that take place between radically different

¹ chimera, in genetics, an organism or tissue that contains at least two different sets of chromosomes originating from the fusion of as many different zygotes (fertilised eggs). The term is derived from the Chimera of Greek mythology, a fire-breathing monster that was part lion, part goat and part serpent. Chimeras are distinguished from mosaics, organisms that contain genetically different cells originating from a single zygote, and from hybrids, organisms containing genetic material from a cross of two different species. Included among the different types of animal chimeras are disperjic and twin chimeras, microchimeras, and parthenogenetic chimeras. <https://www.britannica.com/science/chimera-genetics>



particular the incorporation of exogenous genetic material virus² —the Virus being confident that at least 8% of the Human genome is composed of the DNA of ancient retroviruses that have entered the germ cells (eggs and sperm) of the Human species over the centuries of years.

The scientist might well ask the Virus if it is a living or non-living entity; if it cannot reproduce independently, only within the cell of a human, in the same manner the Virus might also turn his attention to the most extremely palpable figure of Santa Claus and ask the same question. Santa Claus would have to respond that despite the many hoaxes, his authentic identity³, his existence is only reproduced in the minds of humans propelled with the assistance of entities such as the Coca-Cola Corporation of America⁴. In his defence Santa might propose that, in this, he is just as real, in fact even more real, than the Virus. The Virus, of the profound effect that he has over human behaviour, business, and relationships—after all, he can cite the fact that more people believe in Santa Claus than the reality of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

In a nutshell the paper intertwines biological and genetic 'reality' with the constructs of the human imaginary, in an attempt to tease out the various outlines of existence identity, and belief systems.

² Retroviruses comprise over 8% of the human genome (1, 2). Human endogenous retroviruses exist as DNA remnants of infections that occurred in germ lineage cells of our ancestors. Human DNA is mutated, often including various large disruptions, but some components are still functional.

<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1603569113>

³ Saint Nicholas was a 4th-century Greek Christian bishop of Myra in the region of Lycia, Roman Empire, (Turkey). Nicholas was known for his generous gifts to the poor, in particular to the impoverished daughters of a pious Christian with dowries so that they would not have to become prostitutes.

⁴ Contemporary images of a rotund bearded man dressed in red (with white trimmings) appeared in the early 20th century, appearing on several covers of Puck magazine. Shortly thereafter

transformation and is associated with beverages - initially as a red and white Santa Claus for Coca-Cola's mineral water in 1915 and then in advertisements for its ginger ale in 1929. The artist Haddon Sundblom, depicted Santa for The Coca-Cola Company's Christmas advertisements. In the same suite Coca-Cola's competitor, Pepsi-Cola used similar Santa Claus paintings in its advertisements in the 1940s and 1950s.

ACT I SCENE 1

Scene: The Bar L.U.C.A.

Somewhere in a utopian European democracy. The three characters enter from the left and walk to the Bar L.U.C.A, where the painted sign above the entrance reads:

We serve pure spirit to the biologically pure

CHARACTER #1: CARLOS.

Carlos the Bartender. Young, affable and efficient. He also cares for the well-being of the narrator.

CHARACTER #2: EVE.

Eve, a human, identified as female, a biologist; smart, analytical and direct in her talking—but inclusive in her manner.

CHARACTER #3: SANTA CLAUS.

Santa Claus, representing his many roles and traditions.

CHARACTER #4: VIRA, a VIRUS

Vira, an example of the most prolific of all life-forms and perhaps the most representative of the oldest life form (certainly the oldest in existence).

Apologia:

No part of this text was created or assisted by AI Chat-bots or other AI systems. No humans were harmed in this production.

Direction—The bartender greets them, but simultaneously gives

CARLOS:

Good evening friends and welcome, but before I can serve you
EU laws to check your biometrics with a retinal scan

*Direction—Carlos whips out an electronic iris reader, and then
forward to squint into the device.*

I trust this will not inconvenience you—it is part of the new
and Border Protection policy.

EVE:

That sounds horribly familiar!

CARLOS:

They say it's for the common good.

EVE:

That sounds even more familiar!

Direction—When Carlos has scanned each of the visitors he turns

CARLOS:

Vira; I'm happy to serve you, but I'm afraid that your friend
and leather jacket is out of the question, her DNA is complex
is difficult to determine what in fact it is!

And the other one with the red outfit and beard, well frankly
of cellular life or DNA whatsoever—it would seem to be a complex
arrangement of memes and historical context. It does however
highly adapted to profound cold—a new species of extremophile.

CARLOS:

But Listen—As it is a quiet night and I don't want to spoil your
happy to serve you—and then you can just pass the drinks to your
companions.

VIRA:

Good, well make that, a double shot of methyl alcohol for me and doubles of ethanol for my friends, thanks.

Direction—The three sit at the table—and as the bar is virtually empty, the bartender, pours himself, a drink and joins the three in conversation.

SANTA CLAUS:

Direction—Santa Claus turns to the bartender with a smile.

So you must be Luca young man?

CARLOS:

Direction—Carlos returns his smile, but shakes his head.

No my name is Carlos, but I am a **L.U.C.A.**

SANTA CLAUS:

Direction—Santa Claus frowns quizzically.

CARLOS:

L.U.C.A. is the last universal common ancestor to all living organisms, I am your distant cousin to everyone, except to you perhaps! You may recall this from the “Origin of Species.”

Therefore, I should infer from analogy, that probably all the organisms that have ever lived on earth have descended from one primordial form, into which life was first breathed.

Well—I’m one of them!

EVE:

I simply love the last sentence of his book:

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several branches, each having been originally breathed into a few forms—and from these, the great diversity of life has been evolved.

Direction—Eve turning to Santa.

But he has a point there Santa, no DNA, no deal. Our friend here, regards you as a figment of the collective imagination.

SANTA CLAUS:

Direction—Santa Claus huffs and puffs.

Well I may have a complicated history, but as you know, I am not anyone here. I am a replicating entity just like you Eve—It's not well—**do it**—like you!

And like you Vira, I have hosts—my existence is reproduced in young humans—with a small nudge from their parents, toys and not to forget the Coca Cola Corporation of America. But I am of course, an uninvited guest—and one with very poor domestic skills—understand!

VIRA:

But Santa that means you are an empty sign, a simple vehicle for an independent agency and no intentionality.

SANTA CLAUS:

In my defence I would propose that I am just as real—in fact more real than the average Virus—just think about the profound effect I have on human behaviour, belief systems and relationships—after all more people believe in me than the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and I am not me of being fake-news.

As you know I have a long and complicated cultural history. In the 19th century I was known as Saint Nicholas, the Greek Christian Bishop. But even before that at home in the Northlands I was the leader of the Yule Hunt each Yuletide—then my nickname was Odin. Actually I am Sinter-Klauss, too hard for Americans to say apparently. And I am known by everyone, knows me, and everyone loves me—so proof enough. And just like you no-one vaccinates against Santa.

VIRA:

Ugh!—Vaccines are a pain in the Butt!

Direction—Vira turns to address Eve.

VIRA:

Eve, your crew are always trying to put me out of business, little success.

EVE:

Well with your name why wouldn't we.

You forget your Latin, **Virus**, a poison; or a slimy liquid!

Direction—Vira shrugs and turns to Santa Claus.

VIRA:

And you Santa are the new kid on the block in more than one way with the 4th Century is just a moment ago if you consider our time here—Carlos; how old are you exactly?

Carlos:

Direction—Carlos smiling.

It's my Four-Billionth birthday next month—it's going to be great! don't you all come along!

VIRA:

Almost as old as me—I thought I recognised you, we must have crossed paths over the years, maybe you played host to me once or twice.

Direction—Vira turning back to Santa Claus.

Santa—secondly I admit that genes maybe selfish. Mea Culpa! I have DNA with a nice protein and lipid overcoat—I really only have one purpose and that is to reproduce myself, and in that I am similar to you. And I admit that you and I both require a host to replicate. I was here before—you contain no essential code or script, a meme is just a meme.

degenerate sign—whose only merit is the ability to be transmitted, a delivery-man who doesn't know what's in the

SANTA CLAUS:

Well all I can do is to quote T.H. Huxley who in 1880 said:

The struggle for existence holds as much in the intellectual, as in the physical world. A theory of species of thinking, and its right to exist, is coextensive with its resisting extinction by its rivals.

Vira, try and see it this way, you function blindly in this world of sentience—your only real plan is to continue to exist and evolve by random mutation.

Eve:

Well said Santa—Vira, in my profession we describe you as *Edge of Life*—in a limbo state, not quite inanimate, but also not alive; you can reproduce, mutate and evolve, but not independently of host metabolism—your propagate by hijacking the metabolism of another organism.

VIRA:

Instead of being on the *Edge of Life* I consider that I *Live on the Edge*. Being small I don't take up *Too Much Space!*

Although in terms of the biosphere, we Viruses actually take up a large amount of space, more than the rest of you put together. You know we are the *First Nations* of the Earth!

Your profession Eve, in fact your species, might benefit from our gazing—as it would appear that the average human DNA contains fragments of retroviruses from ancient viral infections.

And more—your bodies are home to 30 trillion human cells and another 39 trillion bacterial cells—not to mention all of the Archaea.

All considered you are about 43% human—and 57% us! That's the DNA fingerprint of L.U.C.A. You are, as Carlos discovered, **Mestito**—I am the only thoroughbred here!

Ironically this is the reason that your species is so Xenophobic with Race and Ethnicity. It's in your DNA, so to speak!

EVE:

I resent that, you are talking to the most highly evolved species!

VIRA:

Really, one that shares 60% of its DNA with a Banana! and 80% with a fly; or perhaps you would prefer 84% shared with a Dog—98.8% with the Great Apes! Even your Neanderthal cousins have bigger brains than you—so what's all the fuss about!

SANTA CLAUS:

Whoa Vira; let us not forget our sense of decorum and good manners that you are possibly one of—or *the* original inhabitant of Earth. *let live* my friend—after all you need Eve, but I am not sure she needs you! And she, of course, can claim that she is both Sex and Love—qualities that elude you!

Vira, I counsel you to avoid the superficial distinction that separates biological units of information, and function in an entirely different way to memes, which are cultural units of information. To me they are equivalent in terms of their capacity to reproduce and evolve within the human population.

This distinction simply reinforces a false nature/nurture dichotomy and underestimation of the *kinetic* effects of memes. Memes do not exist between teenagers on social media; they are biochemically embedded in human brains that they inhabit. Memes affect human behavior in many ways—and can change the course of history.

Religion is a case in point—where memes are a political force that harden into dogma, evolving into life changing and life threatening

bigotry and conflict.

Direction—Vira addressing Santa Claus.

VIRA.

So my friend you are now claiming a functional role in biology that's pretty rich for an advertising campaign poster-boy! I'll give you a pinch of salt and get back to Sentience.

Sentience is a rather loose cultural term. Does the fact that you move toward a host organism and wriggle into a host cell not indicate the ability to sense my environment? Or do you suggest that I'm pre-programmed to do this—like some automatic *Rational-Agent*—structured with a code of Beliefs, Desires; and Intentions? For the past few billion years!

Flying blind Santa is something that sounds much more like a simulation. Superficially you are structured to appear Sentient and Sapient to promote well-being, and kindness by fabricating a magical celebration. But under close scrutiny your simulation of human is a pure construct—driven by commercial avarice; just a jumble of narratives designed to numb the mind to the harsh realities of life. Your meme structure allows evil to masquerade as good.

As far as Sapience goes—I have no real need of it. Why worry about awareness or spend energy on subjective perceptual experience? If very well defined, I replicate; I mutate and evolve; I succeed or fail. Down to it—does Eve's tribe really do anything more than to survive?

CARLOS:

My senior, Vira; speaks with the wisdom of age—before Vira arrived on Earth, frozen inside the core of an Ice-Comet, everything was inert—just a soupy mix of organic chemicals. Vira's arrival changed that, and over time—well we all know what happened; time passed and Eve appeared.

Sooner or later Eve started to project phantoms like Santa, convincing enough to believe in their own existence, and in turn these

infected the minds of Eve's tribe, to the point where it is almost a separate fact from fantasy.

VIRA:

Finally an accurate definition of the Human character!

CARLOS:

On that conclusive note I will bring you all a final round—a double and two Ethanol doubles—right? But before I go, I ask you, how do you see the future; as a representative of the large species? What's the plan?

VIRA:

To be frank—and Eve I do not care if this causes offence—and Sapiens so why should I care.

This planet is infected and despoiled—it obviously needs a cure. My colleagues and I are working hard on a method to reduce the power and agency of Eve's species. This planetary counter-offensive is an expanding series of pandemics that will gradually erode human capabilities, leaving them about two percent less capable than the Great Apes—putting them at about two billion years before nuclear fire.

This is our plan for a global equilibrium.

SANTA CLAUS:

In terms of happiness, you may have something there Vira—
CURTAIN.

Imaginary Beings; three characters walk into a bar... is the initial phase of the VIRA Project, undertaken in collaboration with the Institute of Molecular Biology, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal. OBJOBJOBJOBJOBJOBJ

